DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 643 CE 076 893

TITLE	The Role of Community Partnerships in School-to-Work Programs.
INSTITUTION	National Center for Research in Vocational Education, Berkeley, CA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Vocational and Adult Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-08-00
NOTE	7p.
AVAILABLE FROM	NCRVE, 2030 Addison St., Suite 500, Berkeley, CA 94720-1674.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Research (143)
JOURNAL CIT	Centerfocus; n20 Aug 1998
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cooperative Programs; Coordination; Corporate Support; *Education Work Relationship; *Partnerships in Education; Postsecondary Education; Program Effectiveness; *School Business Relationship; *School Community Relationship; Secondary Education; Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

Community partnerships can increase the effectiveness of school-to-work programs. By working together, each partner organization can work smarter, share important information, build a collective set of resources, and keep its focus on its clients, the youth. Another issue pertaining to the creation of partnerships is change and why businesses would be willing to partner with schools. In terms of readiness for change, urgency about change, and accountability structures that make change essential, businesspeople are more prepared to try something new than is the public sector. Communities are reluctant to create partnerships if leaders do not understand all that a partnership can accomplish and do not believe the effort will be well spent. Elements essential to creation and operation of an effective partnership are as follows: everyone relevant to the problem must come to the table; participants must accept partnerships are essential to effective service delivery, feel a sense of urgency, have a shared vision of the desired outcomes, understand what the term collaboration means, talk about their responsibilities and authority in their own organizations, identify their self interest, consider partnership activities part of their job, and accept that they cannot accomplish the goals of the partnership alone. The work of a partnership includes: establishing contracts with its members, sharing information that enhances the members' individual work, and building systems. Facilitation of partnerships requires an "honest broker," flexibility, and staff commitment. (YLB)

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NCRVE
National Center for Research in Vocational Education
University of California at Berkeley

Number 20/August 1998
centerfocus

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAMS

This brief describes how community partnerships can increase the effectiveness of school-to-work programs. Indeed, partnerships were considered so crucial to the concept of these programs that the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act includes a provision that connecting activities must be a component of all federally funded projects. The ideas presented here were articulated in an interview conducted by Erwin Flaxman, Associate Director of the Institute on Education and the Economy at Teachers College, Columbia University. The interviewees are experts in the field of developing and implementing partnerships: William Bloomfield, who was Senior Research Associate and Director of the Center for Corporate and Education Initiatives of the Heller School at Brandeis University and is now the President of Civic Strategies, a technical assistance resource center; and seven of his colleagues at School and Main Institute. The answers comprise the comments of these individuals.

The Importance of Partnerships

Q. Why are partnerships needed?

A. ***By working together—collaborating—each partner organization can work smarter, share important information, build a collective set of resources, and keep its focus on its clients, the youth.*** There has always been an understanding that to help students succeed in school-to-work programs they need to have a good education, effective work force training, and access to relevant social services. But the institutions and groups involved in delivering these components have each been doing their own job without communicating with the others, duplicating some efforts and failing to provide some services at all. There has not been a coherent thread or alignment between what most people say their mission is and what they do in either their strategic planning or day-to-day activities. Alignment is needed between mission and activities to ensure that families get all the services available in the community. The expertise is there; the problem is that it's not being used to maximum advantage because service providers don't know it exists in the community or don't know how to draw it out.

The legislation makes it clear that there needs to be a change in the school-to-work paradigm, that "business as usual" will not be supported any longer because it hasn't been effective. The funds the government is providing constitute "venture capital"; that is, the government is making an investment in the creation of a new multi-sector, multi-level infrastructure because legislators believe that a partnership can deliver services more effectively. Most resources—such as computers, labor, and all the other materials and services that grants usually buy—are not being paid for because legislators have decided that for the most part they already exist in even the poorest communities. The role of the partnership is to marshal them.

Developing a partnership will lead to a more inclusive vision. For example, without a partnership framework for communication, the people involved in the workplace mentoring may never find out what's going on in the academic portion of their students' lives, with the result that the youth doesn't get a cohesive, rounded view of the world. In the medical profession, there are "grand rounds," where everyone involved in a case has the opportunity to understand the whole picture of what's going on in the life and care of the patient. That type of professional interaction is unusual in our field.

Finally, partnerships are the best way for a community to deal with a major crisis. In fact, partnerships are most powerful when responding to a crisis. Many communities are now reaching the crisis point with respect to education. Thus, partnerships are increasingly necessary at this point in time.

Q. Why do you think businesses will be willing to partner with schools or with other non-profit entities?

A. ***In terms of readiness for change, urgency about change, and accountability structures that make change essential, businesspeople are much more prepared to try something new than is the public sector.*** Businesspeople have to be accountable every day, every quarter, so they're concerned with outcomes. Public sector people have yet to be really accountable for outcomes, although charter schools are starting to get the attention of educators, so thinking about accountability is beginning. The business community was on a roll 20 years ago—there was no need to think about change—but still the smart businesspeople knew they needed to be innovative and would have to make changes, and they started working on them then. The others waited for the shoe to drop, and downsizing was one result of not thinking ahead.

But it should also be said that businesses expect results from the partnership—even faster than they would in their

ERRATUM

CenterFocus, Number 19 "Learning How to Learn at Work" lists both Cathleen Stasz and Tessa Kaganoff as the authors. Although Tessa Kaganoff was a co-author of the longer report, MDS-916, Cathleen Stasz was the sole author of the CenterFocus brief.

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own companies. If they don't see them, they'll drop out.

Q. Why are communities reluctant to create working partnerships?

A. ***Many community leaders don't understand all that a partnership can accomplish and don't believe that the effort involved will be well spent.*** They believe—falsely—that they can make school-to-work work without them. Then, when they realize what a partnership entails, they may not be willing to work that hard. Or they may not understand how fundamental the need to do things differently is, how their careers and their success as professional people depend on making a radical change; they may just want to do what they did before, and shift only 10 percent, instead of the 60 or 70 or 80 percent shift really needed. Or they may not want to share the responsibility or power. Thinking about partnerships and understanding the theory is very nice, but the real question for people is whether they want to change, to act and to stay the course. Organizations can't say they're involved in a partnership—as the legislation intended it, and as is needed to create systemic change—and continue to behave as they always did.

Lack of partnership skills is the source of a lot of the reluctance. And there's no reason why people in the schools and communities and businesses should have them; after all, most organizations never worked together before, there was no emphasis, no preparation, no training package on partnership skills. People, understandably, get panicky at the idea of doing something they have no idea how to do.

Despite the need for partnerships, they shouldn't be established until members are ready to make a serious commitment to them. If they are begun for the sake of appearance—window-dressing—serious participants, particularly those in the private sector, will walk away. It's better not to attempt a partnership until key leaders recognize and accept the need and obligation; otherwise the partnership may fail and the well will be poisoned for creation of future collaborations. It's definitely worth taking the time to overcome community and individual resistance to partnerships, because unless everyone buys in they will not work.

Q. What are the misconceptions about partnerships?

Participants think if there's one champion among them, or if they do one thing, or if they have a certain amount of money, the partnership will be effective. The truth is, everyone needs to be equally committed and willing to contribute to the resources of the partnership on an ongoing basis.

They sometimes think that once the partnership gets going they can move on to other activities. But if the goal of a partnership is system building, it must exist, and actively operate, as long as any of the program activities do. Historically, partnerships in this country have served as advisory bodies, or have existed only long enough to engage in one activity, like write a proposal, or their only work is to split up a check. That's not the kind of partnership needed in the school-to-work arena.

Also, because the history and tradition of people involved in organizations are to start programs, when individuals get together to work in a partnership they think that they are starting another program, not building a system, which is what they ought to be doing. They need to understand that their task is not to start anything. Their task is to organize and arrange, and possibly fix, what already exists in the community. It's hard for people to accept this, because most of them are educated to think programmatically, not systematically, so they're worried that they'll lose status in their organization if they start thinking differently and don't create, say, a new program, which is what they've been expected to do in the past.

The Nature of Partnerships

Q. What is the definition of a partnership as it applies to the school-to-work concept?

A partnership is a system building process. It consists of the connecting activities that make a program effective. It's Phil Schlecty's [President of the Center for Leadership in School Reform] three R's: the rules, roles, and responsibilities. It's not about sitting in an office alone and deciding what to do that day. Or about a school's changing its procedures unilaterally. A partnership in a school-to-work context is ***co-management***. It is a co-led, co-managed venture, where no participant, without the agreement of the others, can make a decision affecting policy or the direction of the program or partnership. It requires that all partners learn to trust each other's judgement and ability. A partnership is hard work. Partners have to be willing to stay the course. As along as the policies and programs exist, the partnership must exist.

Q. What elements are essential to the creation and operation of an effective partnership?

First, ***everyone relevant to the problem must come to the table.*** If even one entity in the community fails to participate, the partnership can't create the all-inclusive infrastructure necessary to success. And the right people have to be there, the ones who can commit resources and speak for their organization. Ideally, participants should report directly to the C.E.O. of their organization, or be the C.E.O. Within the partnership, they need to function as part of a leadership cadre.

Participants all have to accept that partnerships are essential to effective service delivery—that there is no choice. We said earlier that businesses are ready for this level of change, but school and social service people have to come to understand that their very jobs, their professional credibility, are dependent on making this collaboration work, because they have to prove to the community that public education is worth their tax dollars.

Participants must feel a sense of urgency. Partnerships don't have a decade to show success, because people will withdraw their children, their tax money, and their resources, and the education system will have to make do with less of everything. Until everyone involved feels an urgency to change, to increase their effectiveness through collaboration, the partnership won't work.

Participants must have a shared vision of the desired outcomes. They need to understand why they're at the table. Even more important, the interest of partners must be captured, addressed, and satisfied.

All the partners must understand what the term* collaboration *means. It's essential that everyone is operating with the same definitions and that the way to make decisions, resolve differences, or arrive at outcomes, means the same thing to all. They need to acknowledge the difference between authentic collaboration and token collaboration. And, as we've said earlier, partners must know the difference between program development and system building. But most important is that there is a shared vision in the partnership. Then the real work can begin.

Participants need to talk about their responsibilities and authority in their own organizations (as school principal or CEO of an organization, for example) and as members of the partnership. It's amazing how many partnerships never do this!

Next, ***participants need to identify their self-interest***, answer the question, "what's in this for both of us?" No one needs another meeting to go to, and partnerships aren't resume enhancers, so unless members can define the purpose of the partnership, there is no reason for it and no reason to expend energy on it. Partnerships fall apart for both serious and trivial reasons, but most frequently they fall apart because people haven't identified their self-interest.

Participants need to consider partnership activities part of their job. Each participant's supervisor, preferably the CEO, must make partnership activities part of the participant's job responsibilities, and say that he or she wants to see the outcomes, the deliverables. Participants can't treat their partnership work casually or the partnership won't be effective. It's not volunteerism; it's an investment.

The resource base must be fully integrated. Everyone needs to know what resources exist in the community and share influence over how they are to be used.

Participants need to accept that they can't accomplish the goals of the partnership alone. They should not act as if the partnership is a social gathering or an entity created solely to satisfy the terms of a contract. They need to identify outcomes that require a partnership to realize.

Q. What skills do partners need?

A. ***Participants must be able to think strategically***. That is, partners have to answer three questions:

(1) What would the future look like if we had it in our grasp? Can we draw a picture of it? Doing this, by the way, cuts through fights over words. It is a step toward developing a common vision. And having a clear picture of the future allows partners to recognize when they are getting close to their goals.

(2) Where are we now, and what are we doing that will help us get to where we want to be in the future? Answering these questions provides a neutral way to assess the existing infrastructure—what's in place, what's working, and what's not. First deciding what the future should look like is necessary to answering this question. This is also the first step toward doing something really hard: stopping those programs or activities that are not working.

(3) How are we going to get to where we want to be from where we are? The tendency is for partners to rush to try to answer this question before considering the first two, and they hit the wall in a very short period of time. It's necessary to go through the stages of development.

Q. Do most participants come to the table with partnership skills?

There's virtually no existing skill base for partnership work. Communities assume they know how to work together, what the vision is. And there's no rich history of collaboration among diverse interests to draw on. So we tip-toe, being nice to each other and avoiding conflict so there won't be tension and participants won't leave. The reality is that in the absence of conflict partners get discouraged because the discussions are not dealing with real issues.

Q. What is the work of a partnership?

A. First, ***a partnership establishes contracts with its members***. This can be very simple, consisting of, say, a business' agreement to accept a certain number of students, a school's agreement to offer courses in certain subject, a mentoring organization's agreement to work with certain students for a specified time period. These publicly identified contracts provide the partnership with a means to discuss, monitor, and assess the work of its participants, and to require that the performance of a partner organization

improve. In essence, a partnership's primary function is management, and a primary topic of its meetings should be the work of its participants.

An important by-product of such discussions is that ***partners share information that enhances the individual work of the members***. This is a real connecting activity. Businesspeople learn about the school curriculum and can integrate it into what is going on in the work force; mentors learn about youth development and how the work of teachers and school counselors can mesh with their own. So, discussion of each partner's individual work is the second primary subject of partnership meetings.

A partnership does the system building. This is really the core of the work; it's determining how business gets conducted. The partnership shouldn't hire staff to do the system building; the staff must function only as facilitators. Partners must make the rules and policies, define the roles and relationships, set the agenda for the meetings, and select who attends them. They must accept that people's jobs and institutional roles are going to change because of what they do.

Facilitation of Partnerships

Q. What do you think is the best way to facilitate the creation of an effective partnership?

A. ***An "honest broker" is needed***, someone without a vested interest in anything but bringing all the relevant people together for a positive outcome. Of course, it should be said that our organization has been playing just such a role in communities around the country for several years.

Communities are hungry to know what to do, but they don't want to be told what to do. So the role of a broker is to ask questions to help people see what's important. Sometimes the broker's most important task is to ask good questions. Brokers help partners arrive at the common meanings necessary for effective work, as we've discussed earlier. Bringing a fresh eye to the community, brokers help partners see what already exists there so they can better use the resources they have. Effective brokers also point out gaps and solutions.

Brokers can help partners explore why coming to the table is so important. We believe that powerful partnerships only form to deal with a real or perceived crisis in the community. So brokers help partners understand how and what their individual self-interests are and how they would be fostered if the crisis were addressed. They help participants go through the stages of development we described earlier, so they take the time necessary to develop a vision, assess the strengths and weaknesses in the community, and only then begin to take corrective action.

Brokers also help participants deal with conflict constructively so that change happens but all the participants stick with the game plan. They can help them "go through the pain" to solve the problem—not delay or complain about it, but do something about it. And conflict is inevitable because there will always be a split between the self-interest of the partner organizations and the partnership—creative tension builds momentum, commitment, and innovation.

Another important function of brokers is to help participants understand alternative ways to solve problems. Participants in a creative partnership look to their constituencies; they reach out to them for the answers. Take the use of resources for another example: participants in a creative partnership will respond to an organization's concern that it can't afford to send a representative to a meeting not by saying that they will send one of their own people, but by providing the funds for the attendance of the low-funded organization's staff member.

Because too many participants usually don't know the difference between an infrastructure, which they've never created, and a program, which they're used to developing, brokers help them create the necessary infrastructure and guide them in ways to make the partnership work toward that goal.

Q. Is the broker necessary for the duration of the partnership?

A. No. We start to smell bad after about three years. Seriously, if the broker is working with the right people, about then it's time to reduce the intensity. If the participants can't be effective on their own, brokers haven't done their job. The broker isn't considered a friend in the community; we're everybody's enemy, the scapegoat, because we push them to a new level of working. But that's what we should be doing.

Q. Why do you consider flexibility so important to the effectiveness of a partnership?

A. ***Partnerships can't keep functioning unless participants are prepared for the flow of people in and out.*** It's the flow of people that gives sustainability to the partnership because its work can continue regardless of the individuals involved. Participation isn't static, although the infrastructure is.

Q. What kind of staff is needed for an effective partnership?

A. ***Staff members have to be committed to solving the targeted problems in the larger community.*** They have to get the information out, within the partnership and to the community. Their job is not to make themselves look good, or to make the participants look good; it's to carry out the decisions of the partnership, to build the system.

Conclusion

Q. What are the benefits of a partnership?

A. As we've been saying all along, and as the federal government made clear in the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act, ***the only way school-to-work programs will be successful is for everyone involved to work together***, on an equal basis, to get the students what they need and to support the individual organizations involved.

An effective partnership is value added. That is, the community benefits in ways greater than it would from just the individual efforts of the partner organizations. The only reason to create a partnership is to get more done together. A partnership builds capacity in the community. It teaches; it shows it's possible to move from one place to the next place and how to do it.

Also, ***there are benefits for the participants and partner organizations***. For example, we've seen firsthand how a new way of thinking developed in the partnership was brought back to an organization: a high school math department that needed to develop an applied mathematics curriculum. The teachers looked at the applied tech prep curriculum the school was using, made a few changes to it—hardly more than a few search-and-replace moves on the tech prep curriculum file on the computer—and saw that they had an applied math curriculum with almost no work experience component. So developing new strategies has a value far beyond its use in the partnership.

Q. Can partnerships really work?

A. Absolutely! ***Partnerships have to work.*** Use this anecdote as an example of why: a training supervisor from a distributions plant told us, "Ten years ago we hired a forklift operator from the neck down; we wanted a 300 pound football player type to move those pallets around. If we got a kid from high school who was too verbal we didn't hire him because we thought he'd sit around and chat, wouldn't get the job done. Not any more—today we run prospective forklift operators through an eight-hour battery of tests and interviews. The first cut criterion is a twelfth-grade reading level. So when a teacher said to me that she's happy to graduate a kid with an eighth-grade reading level, I told her 'we don't hire those kids.' Her jaw dropped, and you hardly ever see people's jaws dropping."

So that's why partnerships have to work. Finally, look at the business experience. Look at different sectors of the economy; education being a big economic sector. Partnerships can happen. But they're hard. They're a contact sport. You have to stay the course, keep working at it—like a marriage.

This *Center Focus* was developed at the Institute on Education and the Economy, Teachers College, Columbia University, which is part of the National Center for Research in Vocational Education (NCRVE). This work was conducted by the National Center for Research in Vocational Education and funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

This publication was published pursuant to a grant from the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, authorized by the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act.

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